

Task Force D Meeting Summary

Thursday, April 20, 2006

Participants: Tom Bloomer – Burr Oaks Farm, Elaine Brown – Michigan Food and Farming Systems, Chris Peterson – MSU Product Center, Justin Rashid – American Spoon Foods (chair), Robin Rosenbaum – MI Department of Agriculture, Gordon Wenk – MI Department of Agriculture.

Additional Participants: Antonio Castro Escobar – MI Department of Agriculture, Susan Cocciarelli – Michigan State University, Bob Craig – MI Department of Agriculture, Doug Ewald – MI Farm Bureau, Rich Harlow – MI Department of Agriculture, Joel Gorch – MI Department of Agriculture, Roger Morgenstern – Consumers Energy, Susan Smalley – MSU Extension and C.S. Mott Group for Sustainable Agriculture.

The fifth Task Force D: Enhancing Agricultural Viability meeting convened Thursday, April 20, 2006 from 1:00 – 3:00 pm at MDA's Geagley Lab in East Lansing. Council Member Justin Rashid chaired the meeting.

Mr. Rashid called the meeting to order, and began a brief round of introductions. Mr. Rashid then stated the goal of the meeting, which was to develop a recommendation on the topic of "stabilizing and expanding the farm workforce." The task force reviewed a draft/brainstorm recommendation that was developed by MFPC staff with input from various stakeholders and task force participants prior to the meeting. Several invited meeting participants shared their expertise on the three main topics involved: new farmers, outreach to minority farmers, and migrant and seasonal labor.

On the topic of new farmers, the task force discussed the programs currently underway in the state to attract and encourage new farmers, and what state agencies and departments might do to support these programs and individuals. There are numerous initiatives underway across the state, and the state could either create an independent program, or act in a coordinating role to connect and promote these private initiatives. The task force agreed that any new farmer education needed to include components of business education and marketing, similar to what an entrepreneur in any new business might need. The task force also agreed that many of the topics in the work of this task force are strongly intertwined, and that it doesn't make sense to talk about creating new farmers if farming itself is not a viable business option, or if farmland is not available and accessible. Susan Smalley, Susan Cocciarelli and Elaine Brown all contributed expertise on this topic.

The task force moved on to the topic of outreach to minority farmers, and determined that many of the recommendations that applied to new farmers also applied to minority farmers, along with some recommendations specific to minority farming populations.

This decision led the task force to combine the recommendations for new farmers and for minority farmers into one main recommendation: the creation of an Office of Multicultural and Emergent Farmers within MDA. Antonio Castro-Escobar and Elaine Brown shared information and current projects underway on minority farmer outreach.

Finally, the task force discussed the topic of migrant and seasonal labor, and how to stabilize this workforce. Joel Gorch and Antonio Castro-Escobar provided much insight into the needs of this population.

MFPC staff will further develop this recommendation (D5) and send it to the Task Force for feedback and input.

Recommendation D5: Expand and stabilize the farm workforce

- a) MDA should establish an Office of Multicultural and Emergent Farmers to cultivate and encourage new farmers, and to increase culturally appropriate outreach to the growing population of minority farmers.
- b) MDA should work with DLEG, MSUE and MSU to stabilize the migrant and seasonal labor workforce by improving housing and access to services.

The next meeting of Task Force D will be on farmland preservation. The next meeting will be in June with time and date to be scheduled shortly.